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SUBJECT: QURANISTS CHARGED WITH "RELIGIOUS DEFAMATION"

REF: CAIRO 1695

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¶1. (SBU) On June 21, the Supreme State Security Court announced that it will charge five detainees with "religious defamation" following a series of arrests in late May. Amr Tharwat, a member of the "Quranist" movement and an employee of the USG-supported civil society organization, Ibn Khaldun Center (IKC), was arrested several weeks ago along with for other Quranists": Adellatif Mohamed Saied, Ahmed Dahmash, Abdel Hamid Abdel Rahman, and Ahmed El Sayed. Egyptian national security services also raided the house where the men were arrested and confiscated property including books, laptops, and flash drives.

¶2. (SBU) The series of arrests were unusual in that charges were not immediately publicized against the arrested, and the GOE did not confirm the men's detention. Tharwat's connections to democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and employment at the IKC brought press attention to the case, including a June 14 article in the New York Times on increasing religious persecution in Egypt. Prior to the announcement of charges on June 21, the Charge twice raised the issue of Quranist members' arrests with Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister for North American Affairs Mohamed Aboul Dahab, but received no information on the status of the detained or an explanation for the arrests.

WHO ARE THE QURANISTS?

¶3. (SBU) The Quranist movement is a small, heterodox Muslim group that looks to the Quran as the only legitimate basis for Islamic law, and rejects the widespread accepted reliance on Muslims on Sunna and Hadith (sayings and doings of the Prophet). Most recently the movement gained attention for its criticism of an Al Azhar-sanctioned fatwa condoning breast-feeding of male coworkers in order to circumvent rules regarding the public segregation of unrelated males and females (Ref A). State Security Services have allegedly targeted other members of the Quranist movement in the past and the group's rejection of Sunna and Hadith as the basis for Islamic law and Muslim practices is an uncomfortable concept for many mainstream Muslims. Dr. Ahmad Mansour reportedly serves as the group's leader, and sought asylum in the United States previously based on fears for his safety given GOE hostility towards the Quranists. Dr. Mansour is Tharwat's uncle.

RELIGIOUS OR POLITICAL ACTIVIST?

¶4. (SBU) Tharwat is a student at Cairo University as well as an IKC employee. Speculation regarding the motivation behind his arrest preliminarily focused on his attendance at the

controversial May 2007 "Second Conference on Democracy and Reform in the Arab World" in Doha as well as his activities with the IKC. He recently organized a public opinion poll for the IKC, and prior to his arrest had planned to lead the June 11 Shoura Council election monitoring teams for the Center. Ayat Aboul Fotouh, IKC director, commented to poloff that she believed Tharwat was arrested due to his being a Quranist, not because of his work at the IKC. The State Security Prosecutor's formal charge of religious defamation highlights the continued challenges for religious freedom in Egypt.

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